By Glenn C. Altschuler 19 hrs ago

'CONSENT ON CAMPUS: A MANIFESTO'

By Donna Freitas

Oxford University Press, $19.95

A raft of surveys document the pervasiveness of sexual assault on college campuses. Although exact percentages — and definitions of what qualifies as a sexual assault — remain contested, it seems reasonable to conclude that 20 percent to 25 percent of women students have been subjected to sexual misconduct. Nor does anyone doubt that most incidents go unreported.

Recently, formal complaints of Title IX violations (accompanied by threats from the Obama Administration to withhold federal funds from colleges and universities that mishandle them) and credible accusations against celebrities and politicians have made the issue of sexual assault virtually impossible to ignore. Several states, including California, now require public institutions of higher education to implement “affirmative” and “continuous” consent regulations; they make clear that individuals who are incapacitated by drugs or alcohol cannot “invite the conduct.” And the Justice Department under the Obama administration directed colleges and universities to use the “preponderance of evidence” standard in on-campus disciplinary proceedings, a lower burden of
proof than “clear and convincing” or “beyond a reasonable doubt.”

Although the author acknowledges that some regulations are vague, unrealistic and have produced a backlash, Donna Freitas is encouraged that sexual assault, at long last, is being taken seriously. That said, in “Consent on Campus,” Freitas (who has also written “Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance and Religion on America’s College Campuses”) argues that “technical consent” (the “how”) puts the onus on women to prevent and punish. The reforms, she adds, are bandages to communities in need of major surgery.

“Consent on Campus” is an unrelenting indictment of colleges and universities for “affirming and reaffirming” the narrative of masculine power and the objectification of women (even as some professors and students are critiquing it) and for ignoring sexual violence until the government made them “sit up and take notice.” Administrators, alumni, trustees and local police, Freitas reminds us, have often looked the other way when athletes and frat boys have committed assaults.

Built on a “social contract of nonattachment,” hook-up culture, she maintains, empowers perpetrators through its implicit agreement that sex is “no big deal,” feelings are irrelevant and encounters, bad and good, should be shrugged off.

Freitas does not acknowledge, let alone discuss, positive developments related to gender on college campuses and the larger society in the past few decades. Her claim that “more regulation, more lawyers, more policies will not change the culture,” in my judgment, is belied by the impact of Title IX.

Moreover, her principal (and surprisingly modest) recommendation — “an analysis and critique of rape culture and the structures that enable it,” done the “old-fashioned way,” in the classroom — ignores the fact that the objectification of women, hook-up culture and sexual misconduct aren’t confined to college campuses. Students bring to college attitudes about alcohol, drugs, sex, gender roles and consent. Until recently, sexual assault has “largely festered under the surface.”

It does “lay bare a kind of sickness.” But it will take a comprehensive effort, including changes in laws, regulations, policies and culture to alter deeply entrenched beliefs and behavior.

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